



June 24, 2024

Peyton Akers, Esquire
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RE: Michael Rusk

Dear Mr. Akers:

Per your request, and with permission from the above-named client, I write this letter to provide some psychoeducation about the “Fight, Flight or Freeze/Fawn” response and how this response relates to Michael Rusks’s interactions with his former supervisor, Chris Gibson.

The brain is organized in both a bottom-up and a top-down manner. When there is not a perceived threat, then the brain can operate from the top (cortex)-down. However, when the brain perceives a threat, deeper structures in the brain process this information first which results in physical responses (bottom-up). For example, if you notice a snake in the woods at a safe distance, you may consider the shape of the head to determine if it is something you should move away from or can safely approach. In other words, you consider your response to this situation as it does not pose an immediate threat, instead of reacting instinctively. This is a top-down use of the brain to evaluate a situation. If, on the other hand, you find yourself stepping on a snake, you are not likely to take the time to examine the snake’s head. You are much more likely to either fight (harm the snake), flight (run away from the snake) or perhaps, even freeze or faint (fawn). This is a bottom-up example of using the deeper structures of the brain, those designed with the express purpose of keeping us alive, to guide our instinctive response. This area of the brain, specifically the amygdala, controls whether we fight, flight (run), or freeze (faint or fawn). All three of these responses are expected and normal attempts to escape perceived danger. The brain responds to traumatic and threatening experiences in the same way.

Perception of what constitutes “threat,” is deeply rooted by experience. Michael’s perception of and response to threat is governed and understood by numerous childhood experiences. A few include:

1. Michael’s father was often absent from the home due to his military career which left Michael and his siblings in the care of his mother, who utilized fear-based authoritarian power, control, and punishment to manage the household. In the relationship with his mother, Michael learned to appease, hide, isolate, and sacrifice his own needs in order to remain in positive favor and reduce the likelihood of punishment. He also learned not to trust authority figures as no one protected him from the injustices experienced by authority figures. This predisposed Michael to avoid setting strong personal boundaries in relationships with authority figures.

2. Michael was sent to live with relatives at about age eight while his father was deployed and his mother decided she “couldn’t handle me.” This demonstrated to Michael that being out of favor with an authority figure could result in abandonment, an extreme form of punishment.
3. Then while under the care of these relatives, at eight years old, Michael experienced a sexual assault. Michael responded to being sexually assaulted with a freeze/fawn response as would be expected. This fawn response had been firmly ingrained in his brain as a safer reaction to perceived threat than fight or flight.

Michael describes his early relationship with Mr. Gibson as:

“...my direct link for everything that I wanted in the department. I was on the marine patrol team - he was my commander, I was on the midnight shift and he was my direct supervisor. I wanted to be on the dive team super bad, and he is the dive team commander. The only other thing I wanted to do was SWAT and he wrote me a stellar recommendation primarily because I don’t upset him and I do well as an officer. I wanted to be an investigator and he had been one for 12-17 years - for over a decade...I looked at him as a mentor to an extent because he had done everything I wanted to do with the exception of SWAT. I’ve always been interested in diving, anything water related, to be an investigator and he had the experience with all of it, so he was somebody to look up to.”

It is clear from this direct quote that Michael considered a good relationship with Mr. Gibson to be a prerequisite to all of these goals. All of this history clearly predicts Michael’s early responses to Mr. Gibson’s sexual advances.

However, Mr. Gibson abused the imbalance of power. Mr. Gibson groomed Michael by giving the perception that he was an inside connection to Michael’s career and affiliation aspirations. Specifically:

1. By sharing “Mason secrets,” such as the “masonic handshake, and some things out of the Masonic book.”
2. By trying to hold Michael’s hand and when Michael expressed discomfort with that, Mr. Gibson stating “it is normal in Eastern cultures and in the masonic culture. It’s nothing gay...”
3. By telling Michael that he was “trying to prep me and get me ready to apply as a Mason” and that he was “going to be one of my references to apply.”
4. By alluding to his ability to help Michael achieve his bigger career goals such as being on the dive team and providing a “stellar” reference for the SWAT team.

Additional grooming behaviors also shaped Michael’s responses to Mr. Gibson:

5. By using Life 360 to track Michael’s whereabouts and “coincidentally” showing up unexpectedly at Michael’s home or “conveniently walking his dog” as Michael drove by;
6. By asking if he could “follow” Michael’s location through “Find my phone” when Michael told Mr. Gibson that he had deleted the Life 360 app upon realizing that Mr. Gibson was tracking his moves;
7. By “smacking my ass twice” and “dragging his knuckles across the front of my pants and trying to play it off as a joke”;
8. By getting “upset if I didn’t call him daddy” when we hung up on the phone;
9. By rewarding Michael with one of only four V8 Hemi Chargers and though Michael feels that he was a very “proactive officer....and always did everything I supposed to do” and had numerous

“certifications and recognition,” many fellow officers felt Michael had not yet earned that privilege;

10. By using guilt and shame to manipulate Michael into spending more time with him with phrases such as, “I’m not as important [to you] as Matt and Alex” (Michael’s fellow officers), or “I don’t have any friends.” “I always mess up my friendships.” “I see what you are doing with Andy (fellow officer), but not with me.” “The only reason I come here is to bowl with you” (when Michael didn’t show up to the bowling league one night and Mr. Gibson called to find out where he was.
11. Even by getting angry when Michael planned to go meet a girl on the night of the incident and telling Michael, “Why are you going to hang out with her. We had planned tonight. That’s fucked up that you are going to do that.”

Michael admits that these comments made him feel “shitty. [I felt like] I wasn’t being a good friend and therefore needed to try harder to be a good friend,” essentially that he owed Mr. Gibson something for the favors being offered by Mr. Gibson. These pervasive behaviors demonstrated to Michael that he was being closely watched, that Mr. Gibson could and would sexually assault him and get away with it, that Mr. Gibson had control over Michael’s rewards, and that certain behaviors were expected of Michael, thereby creating an unsafe, hostile environment both on- and off-duty. Based on what Michael learned about how to handle unhealthy use of authority, it is no surprise that he initially responded to these outrageously blatant grooming behaviors with a lack of clear and firm boundaries.

Another situation that reinforced Michael’s belief that he owed Mr. Gibson something was a night when Michael was hospitalized for having stopped breathing after drinking alcohol following a long-term relationship breakup. Michael recalls Mr. Gibson assisting him with getting upstairs to lay down and the next thing he recalls is being in the hospital room and Mr. Gibson being here. Michael reports that he believed, at the time, that Mr. Gibson had saved his life and even thanked him for doing so, creating yet another reason Michael felt indebted to Mr. Gibson. Michael now wonders how he could have gone into respiratory arrest with “only a 0.21 BAC” and wonders “if I could have been drugged that night by Gibson.” He reports, “After that incident it went downhill really fast.

Michael has often said in therapy that he was very uncomfortable with Mr. Gibson’s advances and the many ways he attempted to send this message to Mr. Gibson without burning bridges. “He wanted to hold hands, and I was really uncomfortable with that. I would try to avoid it by holding an object in the left hand.” He has shared that often when Mr. Gibson attempted to get him to “hang out,” he would come up with excuses, “I forgot to set my alarm.” He shared of having turned off his work phone so that Mr. Gibson could not track him when he went to his girlfriend’s house because “he hates her.” He shared that he told Mr. Gibson he was “tired of people following me everywhere, trying to put the blame on my parents to not make him feel bad. I’m over it. I’m done being followed.” And when Mr. Gibson persisted with “That’s not fair to me. What do they have to do with me?” Michael reports that he “ignored it and tried to change the subject. Michael stated, “I never said anything to him because I was afraid of causing a scene and that he would retaliate.” “I wanted to believe he was just joking and just took it too far sometimes, that it was innocent in nature and he was trying to fit in.” “I did tell him I was uncomfortable with the hand holding and he responded with “it is normal in Eastern cultures and in the masonic culture. It’s nothing gay.” All of these attempts were either ignored by Mr. Gibson or resulted in Mr. Gibson validating his behaviors in some way, causing Michael to second guess his judgment. This is very text-book grooming behavior on the part of Mr. Gibson as well as text-book victim behavior on the part of Michael.

It wasn't until Michael told Lt. White (twice) about his concerns with Mr. Gibson's behaviors and requested a new supervisor that he began seeking a new way to deal with threats. This was a move in a healthy direction, however, reports to Lt. White went unanswered, only confirming Michael's perception of an unsafe and hostile work environment. This strengthened his belief that authority figures could not be trusted to protect him.

If you have any further questions about the the psychology or science behind the fight, flight, or freeze/fawn response and how this explains Michael's behavior and communication patterns with Mr. Gibson, please feel free to contact me at the below number or email (kpinto@thehealingproject.llc).

Sincerely,

Kim Pinto, LCSW

Kimberly Pinto, LCSW, BCN, CCTS, CFTP

Notes: All quotes within this letter are Michael's own words which were transcribed during session, on screen, for the client to be able to see and correct in real time. Creating such a "Trauma Narrative" is an intervention commonly used in therapy for trauma victims to tell their trauma story.

For additional information see:

["What is Grooming in Adult Relationships?"](#)

["What is Adult Grooming?"](#)